

“Soar We Now Where Christ Has Led”

Seeing Beyond the Cross

John 20:1-16

Acts 10:34-43

I have changed the gospel reading for this morning three times.

I first told Jerry and Susan I was going to use Luke’s account of Easter – I forget why.

Then I told Bob, the lay reader, I wanted him to read Matthew’s version – I wanted to talk about how Jesus was going ahead to meet them in Galilee – back in their everyday stomping grounds.

And then Friday afternoon, I changed my mind again, and went back to John’s telling of the Easter story, which we read almost every year.

I went back to John’s version, because in the end, I am Mary Magdalene, standing next to a tomb, trying to make sense of what happened, and wanting Jesus with me.

All during Lent, we’ve been standing next to the cross, trying to make sense of what happened. We have dismantled the cross to see how it works. We keep asking, *What happened here?*

How does Jesus dying make a difference?

We’ve held it up against different models, trying to explain it.

We’ve held it up to the model of Jesus as Victor, conquering evil, and sin and death.

We’ve looked at through the lens of Jesus as Liberator, freeing us, like God did for the people of Israel enslaved in Egypt.

We’ve explored what lies behind the model of Jesus as Sacrifice, looking at the power of blood and the giving of life for life.

We’ve broadened the view, seeing Jesus as God in Person, looking for the mechanism of salvation in his *whole* life, not just his death.

We have come at the cross as crime scene investigators.

We’ve dissected it like a fetal pig in a biology lab.

We’ve analyzed it like a poem in English lit.

We've taken it apart like a lawn mower engine in shop class.

And yet, we always come up lacking, each time with a different handful of unanswered complications.

You know, I think I've been doing this all my life.

I've known since a young age that the cross is important if I'm going to understand Jesus. And I've known from a very young age that Jesus is important if I'm going to know God. And I can't remember ever not knowing that God loves me, and that God is the one I most want to know.

But over and over I have found that God works in ways I do not understand.

Easter almost drove me from the church one year.

To be specific, not understanding the mechanics of Easter almost drove me from the church one year.

I was in high school, doing what every self-respecting teenager ought to do – questioning everything every authority figure had ever told me.

And my mother, doing what every self-respecting parent tries to do – was making desperate attempts to keep me close while I weathered that storm.

She had gotten me to teach third-grade Sunday School alongside her. I think mostly I helped with crafts. Easter was coming, and she assigned me the task (she thought the simple task) of telling the third graders the story of Easter.

She didn't take into account how deep my questioning was taking me.

She didn't take into account how literal my brain still was.

She didn't take into account how strong my sense of honor was, that I wouldn't tell those third graders anything I couldn't fully accept myself.

And at that point, I could not get my brain around the nature of the resurrection. I could not get past a very scientific and literal explanation of a resuscitated body, and I just didn't get it, and I just didn't buy it.

I remember sitting on my parents' bed with my mom for hours that night, (I can still picture the stitching on the bedspread) pouring out my doubts, not sure if I was about to run away from the church, or be chased away from it as a heretic. I was saved by our pastor (whom my mother

telephoned in desperation) who told me it was OK to believe what I could believe at that point, and to tell the story in ways that I could make sense of, and to hang in there.

I learned several things that night.

First, when you pull the string and turn on the light, you find the closet is full of secret heretics who are just as afraid as you are to express their doubts.

And second, it wasn't so important that I understood it all and had the right answers (a hard thing for a conscientious A student to fathom), as it was to stay connected.

Because of that pastor, John Wreford, and my mother, the moment became a tipping point that tossed me all the way in, rather than forever dumping me out. And I began the search in earnest, to make sense of the cross, to make sense of Jesus, because I wanted to know God, who loves me.

A few years later, I was in the chorus of a community theatre production of Jesus Christ Superstar. In rehearsing the songs, I learned new ways to ask my questions. With Pilate I asked,

"Who are you now, Jesus? What do you want, Jesus? Tell me."

And with Judas, I wailed, "Jesus Christ, Superstar, do you think you're what they say you are? Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, who are you, what have you sacrificed?" I found myself sneaking out from back stage to watch the rehearsals for the scene where Jesus is in Gethsemane, anguishing over what he had to do. I listened to that song over and over, looking for clues about what it all meant.

To this day, almost 30 years later, listening to the album is part of my Lenten devotional practice. I listened to it last night, and sang along with the questions again.

*What difference does it make
that Jesus came, and lived, and died, and rose?
What happened there, and how did it work?*

I think I went into ministry to answer those questions.

I hoped that in seminary, I'd get some tools to further the search, to help me dissect and explain and probe. And knowing that the closet of doubters was very crowded, I hoped that if I could find a way to answer them for myself, perhaps I could find a way to answer them for some of the others who ask so anxiously: *What happened here? What difference does it make?*

In ministry, every Easter has been a chance for me to wrestle with those questions I most needed answered. I learned to skirt around my areas of unease, carefully wording children's sermons and prayers and then grown up sermons. My sense of honor is still too strong to tell you things that I cannot accept for myself. And always, I am still asking, Who are you Jesus? What have you done? How does it work?

And now, this year, after several Lenten months of dragging you through this quest alongside of me, I am here.

On Easter Sunday.

And probably my last Easter Sunday in the pulpit. Because I am dying of cancer. And so the questions have a new and different urgency. Because I'm really standing with Mary Magdalene, looking into the tomb, trying to make sense of it all. and wanting Jesus with me.

I heard a story on the radio just the other day that helped. I had NPR on as I ran errands, and "This American Life" came on. [*Know When to Hold 'em, 4/2011*] And I heard David Ellis Dickerson tell the story [*from House of Cards*] of an argument he had with his dad. Or rather, an argument he tried to have, but didn't quite.

David had grown up in an Evangelical Church, and loved it. It was the heart of his family's life, of his life. He loved it so much, he decided to become a pastor, and to learn everything he could. And he headed off to college, to major in religion. And there met the professors who taught him how to take apart scripture and dismantle beliefs. But unlike me, who found in this act companionship in my doubting, David found that by dissecting his faith, he killed it. And he turned on the church he had grown up in, and set about to prove everything they ever said to him was wrong. Lies.

In this radio story, David told about meeting his father for lunch. David was armed for bear. He had all his arguments lined up and loaded, and he was taking aim at his father's faith in the Evangelical tradition in which he still was very active. All he needed was an opening. And then David's father started telling him that he felt called into mission work, to tell others about the good news he knew. And that was what he was waiting for, and David let his father have it – how his father's understanding of evangelism was all wrong and arrogant, and a-historical, and based on mistranslations and the premise of a cruel God, etc., etc., etc.

And when he was done, David's father just looked at him and said, "I'm proud of you and all you've done. I'm glad you enjoy studying and thinking about all this. But I need to tell you, before I found the church, I was miserable. I wanted to kill myself and divorce your mom. When I first went to the Grace Chapel, I thought they were crazy,

but I could not ignore the love in that room. I wanted to make sense of it. So I prayed, 'God, if I have to cut my head off to be here, I will.' Here's what I know. I followed Jesus, and the Lord gave me a family."

And David was left speechless. He couldn't reason with that. You can't argue with decency and goodness. And David realized he had been coming at it all wrong.

Maybe religion doesn't have to be consistent. Maybe it's enough to be good. Maybe it isn't about having the right explanation. Maybe it is about the life that comes out of it.

After a life-time of asking the questions – What happened on the cross? *What happened at the tomb? How can I explain it?* - maybe on this Easter Sunday, it's time for me to get over it. Get past the cross, go beyond it.

I still do not know exactly how the cross works. I do not think I ever will to my satisfaction. I do not know the biology of the resurrection. I do not think I ever will this side of the grave. I do not fully grasp what God did in Jesus. I do not think I ever will in this life.

But I know this.

Jesus knows my name.

And like he did for Mary that first Easter, he calls me by it. He has been calling me by it all my life. On a few rare and precious occasions, through something like a voice in answer to a prayer. But more often through the voices of those who love me best, like my mother, and my husband Wes, and my friends Jerry and Rebecca. And when I hear my name spoken in love like that, it ceases to matter which model of the atonement is best, and that none of them is a perfect fit, and that I can't make my knowledge of physiology fit the resurrection. When I hear my name spoken in love, I move beyond the cross.

What matters is that I know this.

I am sick of being sick. Sick of being enslaved to this disease, sick of it calling the shots – and the pills and the tests; sick of it dictating what I can and cannot do. And you know what? I know Jesus is going to set me free from it. And when I think of that, I don't ask, "How does that work?" I say, "Alleluia! Amen!"

What matters is I know this.

I am not afraid that this freedom will come through my death. Because I already know that death does not win. Jesus has defeated death, with the strongest weapon there is: love. God loved Jesus to new life, and God is loving me to new life too. And when I think of that, I don't say, "How does that work?" I say, "Alleluia! Amen!"

What matters is I know this.

I am not even afraid of the route between here and there. Or only a little. Because even in that little bit of fear, I am not alone. God has been with me in every stage of life (including the questioning ones), because he walked it first in Jesus' own life, and then he has walked next to me in mine. And I know that Christ has gone ahead to blaze the trail, and will come and walk with me through the stages to come. I won't be alone. I never have been. And when I think about that, I don't ask, "How does that work?" I sing

Soar we now where Christ has led,

following our exalted head.

Made like him, like him we rise.

Ours the cross, the grave, the skies.

Alleluia! Amen!

In the end, it does not matter by what mechanism the cross brings us into relationship with God. In the end, it does not matter whether or not we hold an orthodox theology of the physical resurrection.

Reasoning does not make up the whole of reality.

Explanation does not equal experience.

Understanding is not the same as knowing.

So I join Peter, a man of no education, but plenty of knowledge and experience. I join Peter in his sermon, and in my own words I tell you:

I understand this: that God isn't trying to keep the numbers down.

If you yearn for God, he meets you there.

I know this.

This, at last, is an answer to my questions that makes sense to me.

I offer it to you.

And I hope it is helpful.